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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 000070

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/05/2015

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SUBJECT: POSSIBLE UTJ DECISION AGAINST COALITION LEAVES
SHARON WITH UNATTRACTIVE OPTIONS

REF: TEL AVIV 6672

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Religious reservations over disengagement, concerns over the independence of its religious school system, and issues of trust -- not only money or political benefits -- are the core issues preventing the United Torah Judaism (UTJ) party from completing PM Sharon's desired Likud-Labor-UTJ majority coalition. A senior official close to the Prime Minister told the Ambassador January 4 that for the last few days, UTJ spiritual leader Rabbi Elyashiv -- who alone will decide whether UTJ will join the coalition -- has been grappling with the fundamental question of whether the disengagement plan would ultimately result in the saving of lives, a primary objective of Jewish law. Elyashiv has reportedly been lobbied by settlers, Likud anti-disengagement MKs, and, according to sources, one senior Likud member, against joining the coalition. The Ambassador's source said Elyashiv is also concerned that, by entering the coalition, he could be perceived by his constituents as selling UTJ's votes for disengagement, not because it promotes Jewish religious values, but for pure monetary benefits for his constituency. The source added that Elyashiv is also concerned that, once disengagement has been completed, Sharon could renege on his promise that Haredi schools would be exempt from certain educational reforms. A UTJ Knesset member told the Ambassador January 5 that some prominent rabbis are lobbying Elyashiv to join the coalition in order to "save" the disengagement plan. This MK was not, however, sure this argument would override Elyashiv's other concerns.

2. (C) If Elyashiv decides against UTJ joining the coalition -- a decision he could reach January 6 -- Sharon could re-open negotiations with Shas, but prospects for drawing that party into the coalition are poor since it remains firmly opposed to the disengagement plan. Sharon could ask former coalition partner Shinui to return to the fold, but would face strong opposition within his own party to an entirely secular Likud-Labor-Shinui coalition, a combination Likud rejected August 18. Sharon would face similar opposition from his party if he tries to advance a simple Likud-Labor coalition. Sharon could call for early elections, but that would postpone implementation of the disengagement plan by at least the minimum 111 days required by law to hold elections, something Sharon is loathe to do. In addition, few, if any political parties, want early elections. Finally, Sharon could choose to hobble along with his minority one-party government, depending on outside support from informal coalitions for his budget and the disengagement plan.

3. (C) The senior official highlighted that Sharon had made a serious tactical error in using an attorney inexperienced with the Haredi community to negotiate with the UTJ. The lawyer, he said, failed to recognize that, their reputations for sharp budget bargaining notwithstanding, the Haredim actually have religious and moral concerns that transcend finances. The official, who has long experience with the Haredi community, said Sharon did not take up his offer that he assist in the coalition negotiations with the UTJ. The UTJ MK added separately that broken trust between Elyashiv and Sharon is so deep that even a face-to-face meeting now would not help.

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KURTZER